

Banning Student Containers **by Alan November**

When my 17-year-old son, Dan, comes home from school he shouts hello, heads right to his laptop, and logs on to IM. His buddy list is maxed out. His syntax and grammar would make most English teachers recoil in horror. While he's sending quick notes to his friends he adds photos to his blog, checks the comments from his global audience, and snaps mini earphones into his iPod.

Later he switches his mini earphones for some serious sound-canceling ones, picks up his guitar, and Skypes with his buddy the drummer, who lives across town, for a live jam session. Both musicians can record the session on their own laptops for immediate feedback. (Skype certainly saves gas and the exhaustion of hauling amps or drums.) When he is not creating entertainment and publishing for the world, Dan taps YouTube for his favorite Monty Python skits. He is in his zone.

After playing and recording his music, Dan is allowed to play nonviolent video games. He studies the moves of his own draft picks on the soccer field in EA Sports FIFA07. Any adult would have to look twice to make sure it's not a live televised game—the animation is awesome. You can hear Dan from two floors down: "Did you see that goal?!" He is totally engaged and in charge. He even directs his own instant replays.

With Xbox Live he can play in online leagues with soccer fans anywhere in the world. He puts on his microphone and headset, signs on, and the games begin. Twenty-four hours a day, Dan can find players who would just love to beat him. While they play they share hot tips on movies and the latest CD releases. Getting to sleep with all of this stimulation is a problem.

Five Containers

Dan has five basic tools, or digital containers, for managing his content, communicating with the world, and accessing his entertainment: blogs, his iPod, Instant Messenger, YouTube, and video games. Of course he also has a cell phone, which he often sneaks into school to text message me about how debate went that day. Otherwise, he has no access in school to the tools he loves to use. In fact, he has been taught that they have nothing to do with learning.

At home he picks his applications and easily moves from one to another. He is self-taught, self-directed, and highly motivated. He is locally and globally connected.

School as "Reality-Free" Zone

But it is safe to say that Dan is not totally engaged at school. He is not self-directed or globally connected. For instance, he isn't allowed to download any of the amazing academic podcasts available to help him learn, from "Grammar Girl" to "Berkeley Physics." He is not connected via Skype to students in England when he is studying the American Revolution, for example, which might create an authentic debate that could be turned into a podcast for the world to hear.

He cannot post the official notes that day so those who subscribe to his teacher's math blog via an RSS feed can read what's going on in his class. His assignments do not automatically turn into communities of discussion where students help each other at any time of the day. His school has successfully blocked the cool containers Dan uses at home from "contaminating" any rigorous academic content. It is an irony that in too many schools, educators label these effective learning tools as hindrances to teaching.

No Containers Allowed

What have we done? We, as educators, have decided that the tools or containers that Dan uses

when he is home are inappropriate for school and learning. We have decided that because we do not like the content students produce on blogs without adult supervision we will not let them near a blog, even with adult supervision. What do we think would happen to student motivation if we actively tapped the containers our students want to use? Educators should co-opt them. What if we had blocked all use of paper at one point because, early on, a student had written some inappropriate content without a teacher's guidance?

If we could get past our fear of the unknown and embrace the very tools we are blocking (which are also essential tools for the global economy) then we could build much more motivating and rigorous learning environments. We also have an opportunity to teach the ethics and the social responsibility that accompany the use of such powerful tools. For example, many students do not realize that once something is on the Internet it has the potential to follow them for the rest of their lives.

The Movers

As is always true with breakthroughs, a few pioneers are leading the way. Log on to Bob Sprankle's Web site (<http://www.bobsprankle.com/podcasts/0506/rm208vodcast.mov>), where third-grade students in Wells, Maine, are teaching the rest of us how to turn eight year olds into teams of powerful digital editors, researchers, and publishers—doing it all during snack time on Mondays. Darren Kuropatwa's pre-cal and calculus students at Douglas McIntire High School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, are authoring daily notes being accessed by people in six continents at (<http://pc40s.blogspot.com>). Natalie Watt has taught her third graders in New Orleans how to deeply understand the inner-workings of Wikipedia by organizing the class to publish an article about a local historic mansion, the Pitot House, on the site. At Washington International School in Washington, D.C., a high school student spent a good part of his summer building an amazing three-dimensional computer model of the library being planned by the school. This is just a sampling of what happens when we tap the containers our students want to use.

The ability to harness the power of Web 2.0 tools wouldn't be as critical if it were not for the fact that we are educating our students to succeed in a globally connected economy. People around the world have access to our job market via the Internet (read *The World is Flat* by Thomas Friedman for more on this). We should all be feeling a sense of urgency.

As we provide our students with models of how to use their digital containers for learning, the role of the teacher will be more crucial than ever. The fact remains: These tools can be a major distraction from learning or they can be a major catalyst to it. It will be the courageous educator who works with students to explore the power of these tools and in turn empowers students to be lifelong learners and active shapers of a world we cannot yet imagine.